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RECEIVED 29 April 2025

ACCEPTED 09 September 2025

PUBLISHED 16 October 2025

CITATION

Munzir AA, Neureiter A, Matthes J,
Chan M and Bojic L (2025) From sparks to
action: the role of political influencers for
young adults' political efficacy and political
participation in Austria, Hong Kong,
Indonesia, and Serbia.
Front. Polit. Sci. 7:1620631.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1620631

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From sparks to action: the role of political influencers for young adults' political efficacy and political participation in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia

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Two types of social media influencers play an important role in political communication: those who hardly post political content in addition to their regular content (i.e., social media influencers; SMIs) and those who specifically focus on political content (i.e., political social media influencers; PSMLs). To shed light on the difference between the two types, we conducted a comparative cross-sectional survey examining the relationship between following SMIs and PSMLs on young adults' political efficacy and political participation in Austria, Hong Kong (China), Indonesia, and Serbia. Moreover, we investigated how young adults' eudaimonic motivation regarding SMIs' content moderates these relations. Findings showed that following PSMLs, but not following SMIs, is positively associated with young adults' political efficacy in all countries but Serbia. Additionally, in all countries, young adults' political efficacy was positively related to their intention to participate in politics. Also, following PSMLs was positively related to participation in Austria and Hong Kong. Eudaimonic motivation played a limited role as moderator. Implications of these findings are discussed in the specific context of each country, providing valuable insights for future research on the role of PSMLs in shaping young adults' political efficacy and political participation.

KEYWORDS

political social media influencers, young adults, eudaimonic motivation, political efficacy, political participation, comparative survey

1 The difference between SMIs and PSMLs

Nowadays, many internet personalities create and share content on social media platforms like Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, attracting millions of followers (Gonzalez et al., 2024; Klüver, 2024). Over time, the role of social media influencers (SMIs) has evolved. SMIs who traditionally focus on topics like fashion and music may suddenly choose to voice their political opinions online and actively participate in politics, potentially shaping political outcomes, especially during elections (e.g., Harff and Schmuck, 2023; Klüver, 2024; Suuronen et al., 2022). Many influencers have begun addressing political issues such as climate change and gender equality (Peter and Muth, 2023). They increasingly discuss political issues and can be seen as influencers making a political impact and motivating their followers to take political action (e.g., Naderer, 2023; Suuronen et al., 2022).

When prominent social media figures increasingly focus on political content, they can be classified as political social media influencers (PSMIs; Goodwin et al., 2023; Riedl et al., 2023). PSMIs are internet personae who are well-known on social media, consistently produce content on political issues, and significantly influence public opinion through their reach and engagement with followers (Liang and Lu, 2023; Panlee, 2024; Riedl et al., 2023). Notable examples include Hasan Abi from the United States (e.g., Harris et al., 2023) and Rezo from Germany (e.g., Borchers, 2025; De Gregorio and Goanta, 2022; Klüver, 2024). While SMIs who engage in political discussions, advocate for social change, or promote political agendas contribute to political discourse (e.g., Riedl et al., 2023), not all qualify as PSMIs. For example, influencers such as Daria Daria in Austria, Tina Leung in Hong Kong, Cinta Laura in Indonesia, and Anđela Jovanović in Serbia, who initially gained popularity through fashion content, have recently begun to address political topics. However, occasional engagement with political issues does not necessarily place them within the category of PSMIs. In short, SMIs gain recognition through non-political content but may still shape political views when they address such topics, whereas PSMIs are defined by their sustained focus on political content and their role in mobilizing youth political engagement. As their visibility increases, so does their impact, making their platforms instrumental in shaping contemporary political dynamics (e.g., Harff and Schmuck, 2023; Klüver, 2024).

It is inevitable that SMIs or PSMIs can play an important role in shaping the flow of political discourse in society and often motivate previously disengaged followers to become more active in politics (e.g., Naderer, 2023). However, the difference between SMIs and PSMIs in shaping political outcomes such as efficacy or participation are far from being understood. Until now, previous studies have only focused on SMIs and their influence on youth political outcomes (e.g., Harff and Schmuck, 2023, 2024; Peter and Muth, 2023; Wasike, 2023). That is, while the influence of SMIs on youth political engagement has been studied, the distinction between SMIs and PSMIs and the specific impact of PSMIs on youth political outcomes remains underexplored.

Also, following SMIs and PSMIs may affect important democratic outcomes. For instance, both could influence individuals' political efficacy and political participation (e.g., Harff and Schmuck, 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022). Political efficacy itself can be defined as the belief that political change is achievable and that collective community actions can have an impact on the political system (Beaumont, 2010; Campbell et al., 1954; Craig and Maggiotto, 1982; Hayes and Bean, 1993). In other words, political efficacy is a psychological construct predicting political engagement (Rasmussen and Nørgaard, 2018). Meanwhile, political participation can be described as an action taken by individuals or citizens that supports or opposes the decisions of state power holders and can influence political decisions in various sectors of government (Conge, 1988; Verba and Nie, 1987), which over time can be divided into offline and online political participation (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013; Ruess et al., 2023). With that online sphere, especially for young adults who have intense online conversations or relationships with SMIs or PSMIs, the effects on young adults' political efficacy or political participation could be strong (e.g., Riedl et al., 2021).

In addition, followers with different motivations may be differently affected by SMIs and PSMIs. One such motivation is referred to as

eudaimonic motivation (Bartsch and Schneider, 2014). Based on the eudaimonic identity theory (Huta and Waterman, 2014; Oliver and Raney, 2011; Waterman, 2011), the eudaimonic motivations can be defined as an intention to comprehend broader human needs beyond mere necessities, seek deeper, more meaningful experiences, pursuit of understanding and intellectual engagement, aiming to achieve a sense of happiness (Bartsch and Schneider, 2014; Delle Fave et al., 2011; Oliver and Raney, 2011). Such eudaimonic motivations may accelerate the effects of SMIs and PSMIs, on political efficacy and political participation. Prior research has explored how eudaimonic motivations impact political information processing and intentions to politically participate (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2024), suggesting that the interaction between emotional responses and reflective thinking drives the effect of eudaimonic motivation. Moreover, PSMIs can trigger eudaimonic motivation that ultimately leads to political efficacy, as a study conducted by Schemer et al. (2024) showed. Furthermore, to our knowledge, no research has explored how eudaimonic motivation can drive young adults' political mindset into action when following their favorite influencers on social media. Therefore, this study will explore the relationship between following SMIs and PSMIs with young adults' political engagement, in the presence of eudaimonic motivation.

Thus, this study contributes to a research gap by investigating how two types of influencers, SMIs and PSMIs, are associated with two main political variables (i.e., political efficacy and political participation). This will be done for two regions of the world: Asia (represented by Hong Kong and Indonesia) and Europe (represented by Austria and Serbia). Importantly, the selection of these countries is not arbitrary, but rather based on the unique political contexts, digital cultures, and dynamics of young adults' political engagement that vary significantly across these nations. For instance, in Austria, as a stable democracy with a focus on media literacy, characterized by high institutional capacities to encourage young adults' political participation. The government has actively promoted media literacy among youth, including policies to provide free access to print media for those under 30. Although the influence of SMIs on politics is not as prominent here, Austria serves as an important example of a democracy where political engagement is supported through high-quality, trustworthy information systems. In contrast to Austria, Hong Kong provides a case study from a semi-authoritarian context post-2019, where political freedoms are severely restricted. Despite these challenges, youth activism remains high, particularly through social media, with the emergence of phenomena such as *yellow food influencers* – content creators who subtly promote pro-democracy values through lifestyle content – demonstrates how influencers can serve as political agents within repressive environments. Hong Kong shows how influencers navigate and influence political discourse under pressure.

On the other hand, Indonesia has a digital democracy with a dominant youth population. Social media in Indonesia plays a central role in political life. In the 2024 elections, over 20 SMIs were elected to the national parliament, reflecting their significant influence on political behavior. Indonesia stands as the most prominent example of how youth and influencers directly intersect within both formal and informal political spaces. Meanwhile, Serbia faces a phase of democratic transition, with low trust in political institutions and high political polarization. Young adults in Serbia tend to be disengaged from traditional political parties but are active in non-conventional

forms of political participation, such as online petitions, protests, and digital campaigns. Serbia shows a critical perspective on how social media can function in a post-authoritarian society still forming its democratic identity.

By comparing Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia, this study examines how the influence of SMIs and PSIMs on political efficacy and political participation, depending on eudaimonic motivations, varies across different political and cultural settings. These countries reflect a wide range of political contexts, from established democracies to transitional and semi-authoritarian regimes, enabling the study to assess whether the observed relationships hold consistently or vary according to each country's broader political landscape.

1.1 Theoretical background and the hypotheses

To obtain the study results, we created four hypotheses. In the first hypothesis, we draw on prior research indicating that SMIs, while capable of sparking enthusiasm among young followers, rarely sustain political engagement (e.g., Harff and Schmuck, 2023). Similarly, Wasike (2023) found that following political influencers can increase interest and trust in politics, but does not necessarily lead to greater political engagement. Interviews with young people in Germany aged 16–22 years further suggest that much of the political content shared by SMIs fails to enhance political understanding or efficacy (e.g., Peter and Muth, 2023). Because SMIs' primary content areas are often unrelated to politics, we argue that the role of SMIs is likely to be smaller than PSIMs in relation to political efficacy. This leads us to expect that higher exposure to SMIs will be associated with comparatively lower levels of political efficacy among young adults. Thus, for the first hypothesis, we conclude as follows:

H1: Following Social Media Influencers (SMIs) is associated with lower levels of young adults' political efficacy.

On the other hand, the results of study by Harff and Schmuck (2023) also highlight that political influencers who produce political content can increase internal political efficacy. This statement is also supported in another study by Heiss and Matthes (2016) by examining political content on Facebook posted by politicians. The results of their research explain that these political posts affect young people's political efficacy. Although not many studies have addressed this, we argue that PSIMs who produce political content have a positive relationship and play a major role in young adults' political efficacy. Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

H2: Following Political Social Media Influencers (PSIMs) is positively related to young adults' political efficacy.

Beyond its role in fostering political interest, eudaimonic motivation, defined as the desire to engage with media for insight, reflection, and personal growth, may influence how young adults process political content shared by social media influencers. Research suggests that individuals high in eudaimonic motivation are more likely to engage in thoughtful, critical media use, seeking out content that challenges their views or encourages deeper understanding (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Oliver and Raney, 2011). This deeper processing is linked to greater civic

engagement and stronger beliefs in personal political influence (e.g., Chan et al., 2012). In the context of social media, such individuals may follow PSIMs not just for entertainment but to engage with socially and politically meaningful content (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2024). Therefore, we argue that eudaimonic motivation may moderate the relationship between following PSIMs and political efficacy. Specifically, the positive effect of following PSIMs on political efficacy may be stronger for individuals with higher eudaimonic motivation, as they are more likely to process political content in ways that foster a sense of agency and political understanding. In contrast, those lower in eudaimonic motivation may engage with the same content more passively, limiting its impact. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

H3: The association described in H2 is stronger for young adults with high eudaimonic motivations than those with low eudaimonic motivations.

In addition, political efficacy is a well-established predictor of political participation, including behaviors such as voting, campaigning, and signing petitions (Anderson, 2010; Beaumont, 2010). It reflects individuals' beliefs in their ability to influence political processes and has been shown to motivate political engagement among young adults (e.g., Reichert, 2016). Moreover, individuals' evaluations of their political experiences can shape their political attitudes and subsequently lead to action (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Wolak, 2018). Given the central role of political efficacy in democratic participation, we include this relationship as a formal hypothesis to confirm its relevance within the context of our cross-national study, which spans Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia. Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

H4: Young adults' political efficacy is positively related to their political participation.

Fundamentally, each country has its own distinct political communication patterns, which influence how political actors adapt and engage with their respective audiences (e.g., Boulianne and Larsson, 2024; Woolley, 2022). The nature of political communication is shaped by a country's specific media environment, democratic structures, and societal norms, which lead to varying political strategies and message framing. In addition, the increasing presence of SMIs and PSIMs has introduced new dynamics in political discourse. These influencers, who are prevalent across various platforms, can suddenly engage in political discussions and wield significant influence on public opinion, shaping political issues in diverse ways depending on local contexts (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2024). To explore these variations in political communication, we selected four countries in Europe and Asia, which differ in multiple aspects, such as culture, education, economy, and politics. Based on the above considerations, we developed the following research question:

RQ1: What are the similarities and differences of the H1, H2, H3, and H4 results in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia?

2 Study framework and methods

This study employed a comparative survey design to examine the relationship between following social media influencers (SMIs) and

political social media influencers (PSMIs) and young adults' political efficacy and political participation, with particular attention to the moderating role of eudaimonic motivation. The survey was conducted across four countries: Austria ($N = 497$), Hong Kong ($N = 600$), Indonesia ($N = 535$), and Serbia ($N = 497$). Data collection took place in March and April 2024 and was coordinated by the research team at the University of Vienna, in collaboration with local partners in each participating country. A professional survey company was commissioned to assist with the distribution of the online questionnaire. Before data collection, a translation and back-translation procedure were implemented to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence across the respective native languages – German, Chinese, Indonesian, and Serbian.

The study targeted young adults aged 16 to 24, a group considered especially relevant for this research due to their active engagement with social media and their formative stage of political socialization (Arnett, 2000; Boulianne and Theocharis, 2020). This age group is also particularly responsive to emotionally charged and persuasive online content (Loader et al., 2014). A stratified sampling strategy was employed to ensure diversity and balance across gender, educational background, and national contexts. This approach enhances the representativeness of the sample and enables more robust comparative analysis (Bethlehem, 2009; Cohen et al., 2003). While the sample is not nationally representative, it is broadly reflective of the young adult population in each country. In addition, survey items referencing influencers were adapted to reflect the most prominent and widely followed figures on the social media platforms most commonly used by young adults in each national context. Data analysis was conducted using R software, applying multiple regression analysis.

2.1 Sample and procedure

Our sample consists of young adults aged 16 to 24 years ($N = 2,144$) divided into gender and education, and using the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) to classify education programs worldwide (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). Details of the number of in the four countries are as follows; Austria ($N = 505$; age: $M = 20.33$, $SD = 2.50$; female: 50.09%; high education: 30.69%; medium education: 44.15%; low education: 25.16%), Hong Kong ($N = 600$; age: $M = 21.01$, $SD = 2.48$; female: 48.33%; high education: 100%), Indonesia ($N = 536$; age: $M = 20.92$, $SD = 2.39$; female: 51.3%; high education: 24.81%; medium education: 64.55%; low education: 10.64%), and Serbia ($N = 503$; age: $M = 20.57$, $SD = 2.21$; female: 50.89%; high education: 64.21%; medium education: 6.16%; low education: 29.62%). To provide a clearer overview of the demographic composition of the sample across the four countries, the key characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Following social media influencers (SMIs)

We measure the following social media influencers using three topics adapted from Harff and Schmuck (2023). Respondents were asked to rate what kind of content the influencers whom they follow post. The ratings were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “never” to “very often.” The types of content are as follows: (1)

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of young adult participants by country.

Variables	Austria	Hong Kong	Indonesia	Serbia
Participants (N)	505	600	536	503
Average age	20 years old	21 years old	21 years old	20 years old
Female (%)	50.09%	48.33%	51.30%	50.89%
Male (%)	49.91%	51.67%	48.70%	49.11%
High education (%)	30.69%	100%	24.81%	64.21%
Medium education (%)	44.15%	0%	64.55%	6.16%
Low education (%)	25.16%	0%	10.64%	29.62%

fashion/trends/lifestyle, (2) fitness and sports, and (3) entertainment (e.g., music, movies, art; $M = 4.45$, $SD = 2.02$, $\alpha = 0.74$).

2.2.2 Following political social media influencers (PSMIs)

We gauge the following of political social media influencers using three topics adapted from Harff and Schmuck (2023). Again, respondents were asked to rate what kind of content the influencers whom they follow post. The ratings were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “never” to “very often.” The types of content are as follows: (1) climate change and environment, (2) politicians or political parties, and (3) political news ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 2.12$, $\alpha = 0.85$).

2.2.3 Eudaimonic motivation

We measure eudaimonic motivation using four statements adapted from Oliver and Raney (2011). Respondents rated their agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The statements are as follows: (1) I like content by influencers that challenge my way of seeing the world, (2) I like content by influencers that make me more reflective, (3) I like content by influencers that focus on meaningful human conditions, and (4) My favorite kinds of influencers are the ones that make me think ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.82$, $\alpha = 0.88$).

2.2.4 Political efficacy

Political efficacy in this study refers specifically to internal political efficacy, which captures individuals' confidence in their own political knowledge and competence. It was measured using three statements adapted from Craig et al. (1990), rated on a 7-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”: (1) “I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics,” (2) “I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country,” and (3) “I think that I am as well-informed about politics and government as most people” ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.90$, $\alpha = 0.83$). While these items effectively capture the knowledge and self-assessment components of internal political efficacy, we acknowledge that they represent a subset of the full construct as originally defined by Craig et al.

(1990). Thus, the measurement focuses on perceived political competence rather than the broader spectrum of internal political efficacy.

2.2.5 Political participation

Political participation was measured using 12 statements adapted from Knoll et al. (2018) using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from “never” to “very often.” We asked participants how often they have performed any of the following activities in the last 3 months: (1) supported online petition or online signature campaign, (2) alerted others via social media or email to political events or opportunities to participate (e.g., election, petition, etc.), (3) shared political content with the goal of influencing others, (4) contacted a politician, political party, journalist, or media outlet via social media or email to highlight political issues, (5) spent time online to persuade others to support a politician or political organization with arguments, (6) created online petitions to draw attention to political issues, (7) alerted others to political events or opportunities to participate (e.g., election, petition, etc.) in a personal conversation or phone call, (8) supported a petition or signature campaign that I encountered on the street, (9) tried to convince others how to act politically in conversations (e.g., vote), (10) participated in demonstrations or protests on political issues, (11) been actively involved in a political organization, e.g., party, club, student organization, etc., and (12) contacted a politician/party or journalist/media in person or by phone to highlight political issues ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 2.01$, $\alpha = 0.95$).

2.2.6 Control variables

In this study, we control for the five following variables to account for potential confounding factors: traditional media use, age, gender, education level, and political ideology. For traditional media use, respondents were asked to rate how often they get political news from the following sources on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “never” to “always”: (1) TV News, (2) Newspapers, (3) Radio, and (4) Online websites ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 2.12$, $\alpha = 0.74$). Furthermore, respondents were asked about their age ($M = 20.72$; $SD = 2.41$), their gender (50.09% female), their education (48.6% high education; 36.24% medium education; 15.15% low education), and their political ideology in three countries (Austria, Indonesia, Serbia; $M = 3.9$, $SD = 2.28$). Data from individuals older than 24 years were excluded from the analysis to maintain a consistent age range of participants between 16 to 24 years old.

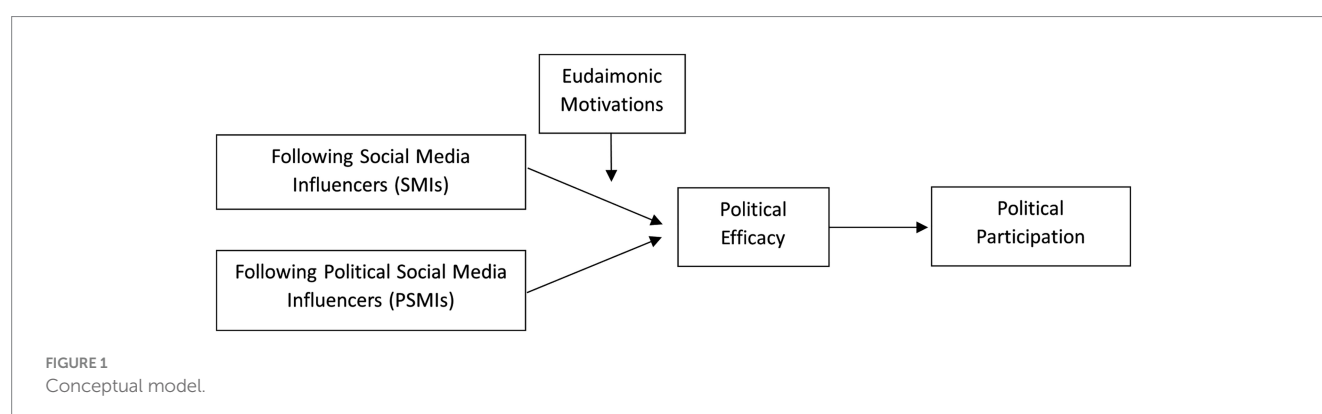
2.3 Statistical analysis

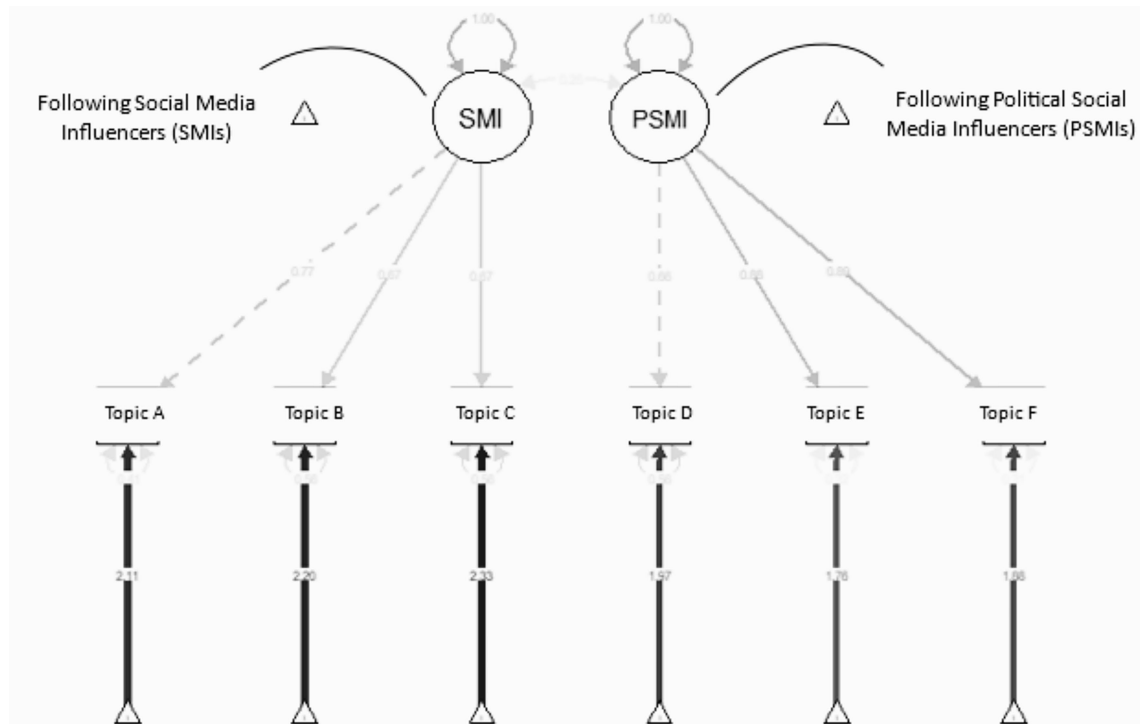
To analyze variables across the four countries, we utilize several packages in R, including lavaan and interaction, due to their robustness in handling structural equation modeling and interaction effects, respectively (Rosseel, 2012). We analyzed the relationship in each country separately, using control variables such as traditional media use, age, gender, education, and political ideology (except for Hong Kong). Additionally, we employed Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and multiple linear regression (Brown and Moore, 2012). CFA was applied to identify underlying factors that might influence the relationships between variables, as well as to validate the theoretical framework guiding this study (Figure 1). This step was crucial to establish construct validity before testing the structural relationships. Multiple linear regression analyses were then conducted separately within each country to examine the relationships between following SMIs/PSMIs, political efficacy, and political participation, while controlling for relevant covariates (traditional media use, age, gender, education, and political ideology where applicable). This approach allows us to capture the unique patterns within each national context and test the moderating effect of eudaimonic motivation.

3 Results

The results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) supported a two-factor structure distinguishing social media influencers (SMIs) and political social media influencers (PSMIs). The analysis demonstrated a good model fit: CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.08, SRMR = 0.062. A nested model comparison confirmed that the two-factor solution outperformed a one-factor model. For an overview of the CFA results (please see Figure 2).

Furthermore, based on the analysis for H1, we found no significant relationship between following SMIs and political efficacy among young adults in Indonesia, Serbia, and Hong Kong. In other words, in these three countries, whether young adults follow SMIs or not does not appear to systematically influence their sense of political competence. This suggests that SMIs in these contexts may have little to no measurable impact on political efficacy, perhaps because their content is not consistently political or because other factors such as offline political experiences or traditional media play a stronger role in shaping young people's political confidence. However, in Austria, we observed a significant negative association, indicating that





Note:

- Topic A – Fashion/Trends/Lifestyle
- Topic B – Fitness and Sports
- Topic C – Entertainment (e.g., Music, Movies, Art)
- Topic D – Climate Change and Environment
- Topic E – Politicians or Political Parties
- Topic F – Political News

FIGURE 2
Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

following SMIs was linked to lower levels of political efficacy. This may reflect the fact that SMIs, who are typically entertainment- or lifestyle-focused rather than politically specialized, may not provide the kind of substantive political content that fosters political competence. Instead, their presence in political discussions may dilute or distract from more informative sources, potentially lowering young adults' confidence in their political abilities. H1 results in Austria ($b = -0.217$, $SE = 0.046$, $p = 0.000$), Hong Kong ($b = 0.043$, $SE = 0.048$, $p = 0.368$), Indonesia ($b = 0.064$, $SE = 0.066$, $p = 0.331$), Serbia ($b = -0.063$, $SE = 0.053$, $p = 0.233$).

Regarding H2, following PSMIs was positively linked to higher political efficacy in Austria, Hong Kong, and Indonesia. This suggests that in these contexts, PSMIs may serve as accessible and engaging sources of political information, encouragement, and civic guidance, which can enhance young adults' sense of competence in understanding and participating in politics. PSMIs in these countries may be perceived as credible and relatable, using their platforms to break down complex political issues into digestible content and thereby fostering political confidence among their followers. In contrast, the opposite pattern was observed in Serbia, where following PSMIs was associated with lower political efficacy.

This negative association may reflect the country's unique political environment, characterized by low institutional trust and a polarized media landscape, where political influencer content could contribute to cynicism, confusion, or feelings of disempowerment among young adults. H2 results in Austria ($b = 0.226$, $SE = 0.042$, $p < 0.001$), Hong Kong ($b = 0.230$, $SE = 0.046$, $p < 0.001$), Indonesia ($b = 0.236$, $SE = 0.052$, $p < 0.001$), Serbia ($b = -0.121$, $SE = 0.041$, $p < 0.01$).

Moreover, for H3, we found that young adults' eudaimonic motivation significantly moderated the relationship between following PSMIs and political efficacy only in Austria. Specifically, in Austria, those with higher eudaimonic motivation showed a stronger positive link between following PSMIs and feeling politically capable. In contrast, in Indonesia, Serbia, and Hong Kong, eudaimonic motivation did not significantly influence this relationship, suggesting that contextual factors such as Austria's high media literacy and well-established democratic environment may be key to enabling motivated youth to translate online political engagement into greater political efficacy. H3 results in Austria ($b = 0.057$, $SE = 0.028$, $p < 0.05$), Hong Kong ($b = -0.010$, $SE = 0.024$, $p = 0.675$), Indonesia ($b = -0.006$, $SE = 0.030$, $p = 0.845$), Serbia ($b = -0.014$, $SE = 0.024$, $p = 0.573$).

Lastly, for our H4, we found a positive association between political efficacy and political participation in all countries, showing that higher political efficacy is associated with greater political participation among young adults. This means that young adults who believe they understand political issues and feel capable of influencing political outcomes are more likely to take concrete actions such as voting, attending rallies, or engaging in political discussions. This finding aligns with long-standing theories in political science, which posit that political efficacy is a key psychological driver of active citizenship. In other words, when individuals feel politically competent and empowered, they are more inclined to transform that confidence into real-world political behaviors, regardless of the specific cultural

or political context. H4 results in Austria ($b = 0.129$, $SE = 0.053$, $p < 0.05$), Hong Kong ($b = 0.508$, $SE = 0.045$, $p < 0.001$), Indonesia ($b = 0.551$, $SE = 0.044$, $p < 0.001$), Serbia ($b = 0.328$, $SE = 0.030$, $p < 0.001$). The overall analysis results can be seen in [Table 2](#).

To address RQ1, we identified similarities in the relationships between following PSIMs and political efficacy, as well as between political efficacy and political participation. Following PSIMs was significantly associated with higher political efficacy among young adults only in three countries: Austria, Hong Kong, and Indonesia. Meanwhile, the relationship between political efficacy and political participation was consistently significant across all countries. Additionally, traditional media usage was positively associated with

TABLE 2 Comparative analysis of following SMIs/PSIMs, political apathy and political participation in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia.

Variables	Austria		Hong Kong		Indonesia		Serbia	
	Political Efficacy	Political Participation	Political Efficacy	Political Participation	Political Efficacy	Political Participation	Political Efficacy	Political Participation
	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)	b (SE)
Following social media influencers (SMIs)	−0.217(0.046)***	0.027(0.047)	0.043 (0.048)	−0.027(0.039)	0.064 (0.066)	0.021 (0.052)	−0.063 (0.053)	0.033 (0.032)
Following political social media influencers (PSIMs)	0.226 (0.042)***	0.339 (0.047)***	0.230 (0.046)***	0.232 (0.042)***	0.236 (0.052)***	0.097 (0.050)	−0.121 (0.041)*	−0.110 (0.025)***
Eudaimonic motivations	0.191 (0.048)***	–	0.294 (0.066)***	–	0.299 (0.057)***	–	0.232 (0.054)***	–
Following SMIs x Eudaimonic motivations	−0.024 (0.029)	–	0.022 (0.022)	–	0.018 (0.031)	–	−0.021 (0.031)	–
Following PSIMs x Eudaimonic motivations	0.057 (0.028)*	–	−0.10 (0.024)	–	−0.006 (0.030)	–	−0.014 (0.024)	–
Political efficacy	–	0.129 (0.053)*	–	0.508 (0.045)***	–	0.551 (0.044)***	–	0.328 (0.030)***
Traditional media use	0.364 (0.046)***	0.203 (0.054)***	0.395 (0.054)***	0.354 (0.054)***	0.243 (0.047)***	0.165 (0.043)***	0.067 (0.030)*	0.067 (0.030)*
Age	−0.028 (0.024)	−0.001 (0.024)	−0.023 (0.021)	−0.035 (0.017)*	−0.001 (0.028)	−0.017 (0.027)	−0.005 (0.026)	−0.005 (0.026)
Female gender ¹	−0.255 (0.106)*	−0.158 (0.110)	0.064 (0.089)*	0.192 (0.080)**	−0.306 (0.114)**	−0.190 (0.103)	0.050 (0.101)	0.050 (0.101)
High education ²	0.260 (0.245)	0.683 (0.210)*	0.072 (0.104)	−0.025 (0.093)	0.142 (0.242)	0.250 (0.224)	−0.055 (0.212)	−0.055 (0.212)
Medium education ²	0.196 (0.131)	0.062 (0.125)	–	–	−0.076 (0.210)	−0.221 (0.184)	−0.450 (0.177)*	−0.450 (0.177)
Political ideology	−0.018 (0.040)	0.082 (0.035)*	–	–	0.07 (0.039)	0.073 (0.040)	0.064 (0.029)*	0.064 (0.029)*
R-square	0.339	0.354	0.601	0.723	0.416	0.515	0.155	0.320

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. ¹Reference category: male; ²Reference category: low education.

political participation in every country examined. Although following PSMIs was positively related to political efficacy when moderated by eudaimonic motivation in Austria, no such moderating effect was found in Indonesia, Serbia, or Hong Kong.

Regarding control variables, traditional media use was consistently positively associated with both political efficacy and political participation across all countries. Political ideology showed mixed results: it was generally not significantly related to political efficacy but had a positive association with political participation in Austria and Serbia. Age and gender effects varied by country; for example, age was significantly related to political efficacy only in Serbia and to political participation only in Hong Kong, while gender was significantly associated with political efficacy in all countries and with political participation only in Hong Kong. Education level showed no significant association with either political efficacy or participation in any country. Please refer to [Table 2](#) for full statistical details of all control variables.

4 Discussion

Political social media influencers play a greater role than “ordinary” SMIs in influencing young adults’ political efficacy and participation. This study is the first to demonstrate that PSMIs have a more significant impact on young adults’ political efficacy and political participation than SMIs across countries. The analysis shows that young adults in Austria, Hong Kong, and Indonesia who followed PSMIs on social media have positive relations with political efficacy. This is because in Austria, the effective functioning of the democratic system, supported by advances in media literacy, enables young people to develop stronger critical thinking skills. In Hong Kong, strict political regulations have fostered an environment where young people are encouraged to think creatively and use social media as a platform to express their political aspirations. In Indonesia, where young people represent a demographic majority, they have significant potential to influence the direction of the political system, especially through social media. Meanwhile, the results in Serbia differ, showing a significant negative relationship between following PSMIs and political efficacy among young adults. This finding aligns with previous studies, which suggest that while following PSMIs and being exposed to political content can increase political interest and trust, it does not necessarily translate into greater political efficacy or participation (e.g., [Harff and Schmuck, 2023](#); [Peter and Muth, 2023](#); [Wasike, 2023](#)). However, given that Serbia is undergoing a democratic transition, characterized by low trust in political institutions and a rise in youth-led political activism on social media, future research may find that the relationship between PSMIs and political efficacy in Serbia aligns more closely with the patterns observed in Austria, Hong Kong, and Indonesia.

While political participation is an important political outcome, our study did not directly analyze the relationship between following PSMIs and political participation. Future research should explore this potential connection. Based on prior research and the Indonesian political context, it is possible that increased political efficacy from following PSMIs may not translate into higher political participation. This phenomenon can be understood in the context of Indonesia’s political landscape, where high political efficacy may exist without a corresponding increase in participation, possibly due to barriers such as limited access to formal political channels or a

lack of trust in political institutions (e.g., [Gonzalez et al., 2024](#)). Additionally, while social media platforms offer young people a space to engage with political content, this engagement tends to be more informational than action-oriented, leading to heightened political awareness but not necessarily translating into active participation, such as voting or attending protests. Previous research has indicated that while social media can foster political efficacy, it may not always drive tangible political actions due to the passive nature of online engagement (e.g., [Bartsch et al., 2024](#); [Peter and Muth, 2023](#)).

On the other hand, although eudaimonic motivation is conceptually relevant to political engagement, our study primarily examined its moderating role. The direct relationship between eudaimonic motivation and political efficacy remains to be explored in future research. This finding aligns with studies indicating that individuals motivated by a desire to seek political information tend to exhibit higher political efficacy (e.g., [Bartsch et al., 2024](#); [Chan et al., 2012](#); [Schemer et al., 2024](#)). Eudaimonic motivation, which is driven by a desire for personal growth and understanding, encourages young adults to engage more deeply with political content, fostering a sense of empowerment and confidence in their ability to influence political outcomes. In countries like Austria, where media literacy is high and democratic processes are well-established, young adults are likely more equipped to critically analyze political content and, as a result, develop stronger political efficacy. In contrast, in countries with less developed media literacy or democratic institutions, eudaimonic motivations might still fuel curiosity about politics but may not always translate into the same level of efficacy due to factors such as political instability or media fragmentation. This highlights the role of cultural and institutional contexts in shaping how motivations translate into political engagement.

Furthermore, with eudaimonic motivation as a moderator, only young adults in Austria who followed PSMIs exhibited a significant positive relationship with their political efficacy. One possible explanation for this finding is that Austria has a well-established democratic culture and comparatively high levels of media and digital literacy among young adults (e.g., [Trappel and Tomaz, 2022](#)), as previously explained. This environment encourages young people to engage critically with political information and enhances their ability to assess the credibility of political content (e.g., [Austin and Domgaard, 2024](#)). Additionally, PSMIs in Austria are typically more consistent and transparent in producing issue-based political content, which may increase their perceived credibility compared to influencers in other countries (e.g., [Peter and Muth, 2023](#)). As a result, eudaimonic motivation may be more effective in enhancing political efficacy through the consumption of political content in Austria than in other contexts where digital literacy, media trust, or the influencer landscape differs.

In addition, this study revealed a significant positive relationship between political efficacy and political participation in all countries. This means that the higher the political efficacy of young adults, influenced by following PSMIs on social media in Austria, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Serbia, the more young adults reported to politically participate. In line with this, various previous studies showed that the belief of individuals that they can change a political system – in other words, their political efficacy – leads to political action, for instance, voting in a general election (e.g., [Beaumont, 2010](#); [Campbell et al., 1954](#); [Hayes and Bean, 1993](#); [Wolak, 2018](#)).

Finally, cultural and political contexts shape how PSMIs influence youth. In European countries, like Austria and Serbia, PSMIs can

express their political opinions online without worrying about punishment by the state. This results in a diversity of different political opinions and discussions, forming a more transparent democratic system. In Asian countries, such as Hong Kong and Indonesia, PSIMs must be careful in sharing their opinion or responses to a political issue online with their followers because if the government or political actors are offended by this, PSIMs could have negative consequences, for instance, they can receive various unexpected punishments from the government or political actors. With all the advantages and strengths that PSIMs have, it has become increasingly clear how important the role of political influencers is in developing communication strategies during elections (e.g., [Borchers, 2025](#)). They not only provide political information but also act as advisors, guiding the public in selecting which candidates are best suited to be policymakers for the nation. This could, of course, also come with dangers, for instance, when PSIMs engage in political misinformation or use persuasion strategies to influence political outcomes (e.g., [Dubois et al., 2020](#)).

4.1 Limitations and future research

Several limitations in this study need to be considered. First, there is a need to explore other possible variables influencing political participation in the context of PSIMs. For instance, emotions could play an important role when seeing the content of PSIMs. Previous research has shown that emotions might influence young adults to decide whether or not to engage in politics (e.g., [Valentino et al., 2009](#); [Wolak and Sokhey et al., 2022](#)). This can be negative emotions such as anger after viewing political content from political influencers, followed by young adults (e.g., [Valentino et al., 2009](#)). Therefore, future research should explore how negative emotions based on following PSIMs and receiving their political content on social media can affect young adults' political mindset and political behavior.

Second, in addition to SMIs and PSIMs, there are also AI or CGI influencers who could also engage in political content online. This could become a new source of political information that can be trusted by young adults in the future (e.g., [Zhang et al., 2024](#)). Future research needs to examine more deeply the effects of AI Influencers in politics on young adults.

Third, on the methodological part, there is a need for qualitative research, including interviews with young adults, to get deeper qualitative insights into underlying psychological processes influencing how PSIMs affect young adults' political mindset and decision to participate in politics. Especially considering that each political influencer has a different personality, originates from a different country, and has their own uniqueness, it is important to know how these factors are perceived by young adults and how effective they are regarding young adults' political outcomes.

Fourth, a limitation of the present study lies in the measurement of political efficacy, which is confined to internal political efficacy and, more specifically, the perceived knowledge dimension. Although this operationalization aligns with our research focus on young adults' self-perceptions of political competence, it does not capture other dimensions such as external political efficacy, which reflects beliefs about the responsiveness of political institutions. Future research would benefit from employing more comprehensive scales that include both internal and external political efficacy dimensions to

provide a fuller understanding of how political efficacy relates to social media influencer exposure and political participation.

Last, this study relied on self-reported data from young adults. As a result, political participation was assessed based on young adults' self-reports and only in the form of intentions rather than their actual behavior, which may introduce bias. Future research is encouraged to incorporate more direct and objective measures of political participation.

4.2 Implications

Compared to SMIs, PSIMs play a very important role in attracting the attention of young adults, especially young voters during elections (e.g., [Klüver, 2024](#); [Rose and Rohlinger, 2024](#); [Sehl and Schützeneder, 2023](#)). Knowing that exposure to political content on social media due to following political influencers can engage young adults in politics, also political actors and governments could pay more attention to collaborating with political influencers, or even becoming one of the political influencers who are active on social media (e.g., [Casero-Ripollés, 2020](#); [Pérez-Curiel and Limón-Naharro, 2019](#); [Pöyry and Reinikainen, 2024](#); [Yang and Kang, 2021](#)).

5 Conclusion

From this study, we can conclude that PSIMs exert a greater influence on young adults' political outcomes than SMIs. Specifically, PSIMs directly and positively affect young adults' political efficacy in Austria, Hong Kong, and Indonesia. In contrast, SMIs, who rarely engage with political content, play a limited role in shaping political outcomes. These results underscore the critical role of context, suggesting that national political and media environments may shape the impact of PSIMs. Ultimately, understanding the role of PSIMs within specific political and media contexts is essential for explaining how young adults engage with democracy in the digital age.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

AM: Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Software, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. AN: Formal analysis, Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Data curation. JM: Data curation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Resources. MC: Writing – review & editing, Resources. LB: Resources, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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